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# Body, Sign and Double: a Parallel Analysis of Elaine Shemilt's Doppelganger, Federica Marangoni's The Box of Life and Sanja Ivekovic 's Instructions N1 and Make up - Make down

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**Body, sign and double: a parallel analysis of Elaine Shemilt's *Doppelgänger*, Federica Marangoni's *The Box of Life* and Sanja Iveković's *Instructions N°1* and *Make up - Make down***

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Body, identity, self-representation, sexuality, stereotypical images of women portrayed by the society and the media, and the condition of female professional artists: these themes were expressed and developed in several early video works in the 70s and early 80s by women artists that didn't have direct knowledge or contact between each other. This simultaneity of thematic is an unusual phenomenon that reveals common, contemporary sensibilities within both Europe and the USA.

To remark this significant trend, video artist and historian Catherine Elwes wrote: "women on this side of the Atlantic looked for ways of problematizing the appearance of the female body whilst negotiating new forms of visibility".<sup>1</sup> In her analyses Elwes identifies several strategies used by performance and video women artist to avoid the "pitfalls of sexual representation", exploiting the possibilities of the medium.

The early experimentations with video by many women artists in Europe and the USA have been marginalized for years and most of the artworks have been lost or fallen into oblivion. Only recently few of them have been showed and re-evaluated in exhibitions and publications but the contribution of women artists to video has not yet been fully recovered and reassessed. Several themes and topics shared by early women artists' video pieces have not yet been analyzed and contextualized in the wider European scene.

Starting from these premises, the upcoming Arts and Humanities Research Council funded research project EWVA (European Women's Video Art in the 70s and 80s), led by Prof. E. Shemilt, and based at DJCAD, University of Dundee (Scotland), aims to re-assess the contribution of European women artists to the video practice and retrace the many histories of the use of this then new medium by women artists in Europe. It follows the successful AHRC funded research projects Rewind, which recovered more than 450 British video works from the 70s and 80s and REWIND*Italia*, which aimed to retrace the histories of early Italian video art. Both projects were led by Prof. Steve Partridge, a pioneer of British video art, and based at DJCAD, University of Dundee.

This paper will analyse four works from early video art, Elaine Shemilt's *Doppelgänger* (1979-78), Federica Marangoni's *The Box of Life* (1979) and Sanja Iveković's *Instructions N.1* (1976) and *Make up - Make down* (1976-78), constituting an initial compared study on the topic to be developed in following contributions and articles.

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<sup>1</sup> C. Elwes, *Video Art: A Guided Tour*, I.B.Tauris, London 2005, p. 48.

*Doppelgänger* by Elaine Shemilt<sup>2</sup> has been recovered by REWIND, after more than thirty years of oblivion (it was showed only once, at the exhibition concluding the residency, in which it was produced).<sup>3</sup>

Starting our analyses from the title, the word 'doppelgänger' has its origin in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century from German (literally "double-goer") and means "an apparition or a double of a living person".<sup>4</sup>

It is interesting to notice that the theme of the "double" was quite popular in early video artworks. It was developed with different sensibilities and motifs and is probably to refer to the instant feedback that the medium provided as the artist could "reflect" him or herself in the mirror of the video monitor while videotaping. This effect was enhanced by the fact that the artist could re-watch the recorded piece immediately after it was videotaped. In her seminal piece *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism* from 1976, Krauss rightly points out that "unlike the visual arts, video is capable of recording and transmitting at the same time – producing instant feedback. The body [the human body] is therefore, as it were, centered between two machines that are the opening and closing of a parenthesis. The first of these is the camera; the second is the monitor, which re-projects the performer's image with the immediacy of a mirror".<sup>5</sup>

This phenomenon created an instant double of the artist, influencing his or her behavior<sup>6</sup> and could be used by the performer to control the framing during the shooting while in front of the camera. The possibility of re-recording on the same tape gave also the possibility to create "doubles" in the video. Example of the use of the theme of the double and the mirror include in Europe *Oiccheps* (1976) and *VTR & I* by Michele Sambin, *Triologue* (1977) by David Critchley, *Senza titolo (Mirror)* (1976) by Goran Trbuljak, *The Box of Life* (1979) by Marangoni, and *Video As No Video* (1978) by Luigi Viola. The theme of the double and the doppelgänger in literature and visual arts is widely treated by critics from many different angles and would be impossible and not fruitful to condense it in this brief study. In any case, a concept that we can't avoid to mention in our analysis is what Sigmund Freud defined in 1919 as the "Uncanny" (in the original German version *Unheimlich*). Analyzing Hoffmann renowned novel *The Devil's Elixir* (1815), Freud says: "These

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<sup>2</sup> An initial analysis of *Doppelgänger* was published in L. Leuzzi, *Notes on Doppelgänger*, October 2012, available at <http://www.rewind.ac.uk/documents/Elaine%20Shemilt/ES001.pdf> (retrieved Feb 2, 2015). The present analysis develops from that.

<sup>3</sup> The re-mastered version was presented at the REWIND book launch at TATE Modern in London (25<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2012).

<sup>4</sup> See entry *Doppelgänger* in the Oxford Dictionary <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/it/definizione/inglese/doppelg%C3%A4nger> (retrieved Jan 14, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> R. Krauss, 'Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism', *October*, vol. 1, Spring 1976, p. 52.

<sup>6</sup> See Tom Sherman, 2005 (ed. 2008) *The Nine Lives of Video Art: Technological evolution, the repeated near-death of video art, and the life force of vernacular video...* [http://www.gama-gateway.eu/uploads/media/Nine\\_lives\\_of\\_video\\_art.pdf](http://www.gama-gateway.eu/uploads/media/Nine_lives_of_video_art.pdf) (retrieved Jan 14, 2015).

themes [of uncanniness] are all concerned with the idea of a “double” in every shape and degree, with persons, therefore, who are to be considered identical by reason of looking alike”.<sup>7</sup> Starting from the premise of Otto Rank’s *Der Doppelgänger* (1914), Freud attempts to retrace the psychoanalytical origins of the “Uncanny”, also to explain this phenomenon with the double. Many passages from his essay still provide fruitful elements to our present analysis and more in general to the analysis of artworks that focus on the “double” and have inspired several artists.<sup>8</sup>

*Doppelgänger* begins with a close up of the face of Shemilt in front of the camera, with her piercing eyes facing it directly and later we see her approaching a mirror and take a sit in front of it, with her back to the camera, simply dressed in a denim overall and T-shirt. The mirror reflects her putting some make-up on her face with very dry, precise gestures. During these actions different voices can be heard: they are records of some psychological analysis on schizophrenia, evoking a double personality. And the use of multiple sound traces in itself creates an effect of multiple layers of the personality represented. At some point, twice, the performance is suddenly interrupted by another image: showing the face of the artist, elegantly dressed, with her hair combed and her make-up on. This frozen more formal and conventional portrait begins slightly to move creating many doubles of her face.

Then the action goes back to what we could call the “mirror set”: and it’s evident now how the make up that the artist has put on her skin has become too much. We can distinguish the borders of it on her forehead: her face has become a mask with an effect that it’s similar to theatrical make-up. At that point she drops the concealer and takes a dark drawing pen: and like on canvas, evoking the traditional image and position of the painter, and the use of mirror in self-portraits, she begins to draw on the mirror in front of her. From the eyebrow to the shadow of the nose, and later the lips and the oval of the face, the hair, the neck and shoulders, the artist shapes a sort of double of herself following the traces/borders of her reflected image. Another mask in black and red (for the lips, this can be distinguished even in the black and white) is thus created and gets mingled with the reflected image of the artist. This tableaux evokes inevitably, the myth of Narcissus: but the reflected image of the artist is twisted by her own hand, creating a phantasma double – the doppelgänger –that sits in front of her. Even the mirror in this case is double: the material one in the scene and the electronic one given by the eye of the camera (as the artist looks into it at beginning of the video but also as the monitor, as mentioned evokes and sometimes constitutes in some sense a mirror).

Furthermore this doppelgänger seems to be part of herself: she continues to work on the image, moving her face and mimicking the gestures of applying

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<sup>7</sup> S. Freud, *The “Uncanny”*, 1919, Translated by Alix Strachey.

<http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>, pp. 8-9 (retrieved Jan 14, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Among the most renown and interesting examples we can recall Mike Kelley’s exhibit *The Uncanny* at Tate Liverpool (20 Feb – 3 May 2004) and MUMOK, Wien (16 July- 31 October 2004). See catalogue Mike Kelley, *The Uncanny*, Verlag Der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne, 2004.

lipstick to her lips, continuing to look at herself in the mirror, checking the result.

At the end of the performance other images of the body and the face of the artist with the overlapping layers of other body/face images appear, which evoke once more a multifaceted personality.

Finally we get back to the mirror tableaux and the artist has gone: the doppelgänger has taken her place. In this aspect we can evoke Freud's "uncanny": the continuous mixing and confusing of the doubles. It's clear from this brief analysis that *Doppelgänger* is not the mere record of a performance but is a video art work in itself with its own autonomy that exploits the specificity and the nature of the medium in a very distinguished way: video becomes a tool for introspection and expression/representation of the inner self, to build an intense image of the personal and public portrait. In fact, video as a time-based medium allows the artist to show the genesis of that image, the process of its making and the gesture of the artist as part of it. Furthermore, the continuous mix between the action of the drawing ("mirror tableaux") and the images of the artist (her face, naked body) creates a stratification of layers that open window in her inner life, in what lies under the image, under the surface.

The *Box of Life* by Federica Marangoni was shot on 16 mm and then transferred to video (in fact, only a little bit later the artist began to use video).<sup>9</sup> The film was directed by Gianluigi Poli and produced by Centro Video Arte of Palazzo dei Diamanti, Ferrara.

The sequence opens with Marangoni taking out of a drawer some wax female body parts casts, separately displayed on shelves, and placing them accurately on a electrically warmed table. In this way she rebuilds the shape of a human body. Even if not specified, the viewer can assume the casts reproduce the artist's body, creating a fragmented sculptural double of herself<sup>10</sup>. When the work is finished she stops and observes it from distance. Then she wears dark glasses, takes a blowtorch and melts the pieces. The body parts slowly start to melt down. The Marangoni stops and the camera shows the deformed wax body pieces on the table surrounded by what looks like blood (in reality the melted wax), then zooms on the deformed wax mask and goes out of focus. And then after another close up to the title of the work and to the wax mask, the camera moves to Marangoni who puts on her face a transparent plastic mask. Her breath little by little makes the mask opaque. In the next take at Marangoni's side appear other people that wear as well plastic masks that have become opaque. The camera zooms on each of them and we can recognize Lola Bonora and other people who worked at Centro

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<sup>9</sup> *The Box of Life* is available on Marangoni's website, <http://www.federicamarangoni.com/portfolio/1979-the-box-of-life/> (retrieved January 11th, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> For this aspect see G. Weinbren, *Symbols and Materials: Notes on Three Artists Working in Video in Venice in the 1970s*, in L. Leuzzi, S. Partridge (eds.), *REWINDItalia Early Video Art in Italy* (provisory title), John Libbey Publishing, New Barnet, to be published in 2015.

Video Arte. Then the camera again shows them all together from one side, zooming in on some details: the masks shine at the light making the faces not recognizable.

Marangoni then wears the deformed wax: the camera constantly blurry the image. The film is closed by Marcel Duchamp's epitaph: *D'ailleurs, c'est toujours les autres qui meurent* (Anyway, it's always the other guy who dies; in Italian "*D'altronde sono sempre gli altri che muoiono*").

As Marangoni has explained the video focuses on the precarious condition of human life: "Through some emblematic symbols I try to give...an image of the violence and the inevitable condition in which Man lies, that is at the same time a message of Life"<sup>11</sup>.

The double plays a fundamental role in this artwork and we can trace many similarities between Marangoni and Shemilt pieces including: in both cases the artists create a double with their own hands; the mask; the multiplication of these doubles; the different camera effect to create multiple layers or blurry images.

Evoking again Freud's essay, he mentions also as a source of "uncanny" the "wax work figures"<sup>12</sup> and dismantled body parts<sup>13</sup> and links the uncanny feeling of the "double" to the repressed (and then re-emerged) infantile narcissism for which the double can insure immortality. This is interesting as we saw that the precarious status of the Humankind is the focus of the video. Without going to much in detail in our parallel and not trying to give a psychoanalytical reading to the video, anyway Freud's readings still provide food for thought and suggestions for our analysis.

Croatian photographer, performance, video, film and installation artist Sanja Iveković produced a small number of videos during the *Incontri di Motovun* [Motovun Encounters], organized by Galleria del Cavallino and Ladislav Barišić's Galerija Likovna in Motovun, a small village in Croatia. Including *Instructions N. 1*, a video performance that seems to be particularly close for its structure and some elements to the artworks by Shemilt and Marangoni. This video was produced during the Motovun Encounter dedicated to the theme of identity in 1976.

In the opening of the sequence, the artist faces the camera as it was a mirror with a little brush in her hand and trace some black arrows on her face. As explained by the artist these signs are a guideline for massages.<sup>14</sup> Regardless of that, they also evoke visually the drawings made to guide plastic surgery but also the gesture of putting the make up on, a daily action familiar to most women. It also recalls all those advertisements in which women are given visual instructions on how to use beauty products.

Iveković continues until her face and neck are covered with signs. When she

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<sup>11</sup> F. Marangoni, *The Box of Life*, in V. Fagone, *Camere incantate, espansione dell'immagine*, exhibition catalogue (Milan, Palazzo Reale, 15 May-15 June 1980), Milan 1980, p. 146. The quote was translated by the authors.

<sup>12</sup> S. Freud, *The "Uncanny"*, p. 5

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> D. Marangon, *I videotapes del Cavallino*, Edizioni del Cavallino, Venice 2004, p. 135-136.

is done, she stares briefly at the camera and then starts massaging accurately the signs on her face and spreading the black on her face. A common theme with Shemilt's video - and many other video pieces from that period as we mentioned above - is the mirror: the lens of the camera plays a mirror in which the artist reflects herself, imitating a daily gesture that women do to apply make up. This proximity to the camera also creates an effect of the intimacy with the audience.

At the 1976 Motovun Encounter dedicated to identity, Iveković also made *Make up -Make down* (the piece was re-made in color in 1978). In this case, the camera focuses on some beauty products that are opened and sensually touched by the hands of the artist. As the artist has explained: "the daily act of applying make up (normally hidden) becomes an erotic game with the objects with all the characteristics of a variety act".<sup>15</sup>

As Shemilt's *Doppelganger*, Iveković's video works question the stereotyped image of the woman given by traditional society and media (and the marketing system in particular) and the role of the woman artist.

The make up and plastic surgery, not only refers to the social status of the woman, who is required by society to be beautiful (a concept that is also evoked in a slightly different way also in Marina Abramović's video *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* from 1975), but it also evokes the possibility of self changing and self-shaping our own image. The same gesture of applying make up is significantly included in *Representational Painting* (1971) by American feminist video artist Eleonor Antin.

Examining more generally Shemilt, Marangoni and Iveković's practice at the time, all three artists were conveying feminist concepts and themes in their artworks and the video provided an excellent medium for that.

From this brief analysis we can see a *fil rouge* that links in some way these seminal video works by women artists from the late Seventies/early Eighties. Common themes, approaches and sensibilities emerge and recur and can be put in relationship with many other video works by women artists from the same period.

Future studies and researches with EWVA will hopefully help contextualizing the early video works by women artists the wider context of European Video Art.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.